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ABSTRACT

The differences between the early childhood and special education approaches to educating young handicapped children are compared; and an approach which balances both schools of thought is supported. Early childhood educators are seen to gear programs to fit developmental characteristics and needs of the student; while special educators are noted to offer such educational alternatives as analyzing educational tasks, structuring the environment, and modifying behavior. Cited are some examples of imbalanced approaches to teaching children with handicapping conditions which include language delay, multiple handicaps, and behavioral disturbance. Briefly described is a curriculum for teachers which stresses that there is no one approach to educational problems. (SB)

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Early Childhood/Special Education: A Delicate Balance *

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The topic of my talk: "Special Education-Early Childhood: A Delicate Balance" is a conviction that has grown out of the last several years of my work with people involved in the education of young handicapped children and their families. In speaking to these people, some of whom were either providing services or in the process of developing programs for young children with disabling conditions, I heard two types of comments. Those whose professional preparation had been primarily in Early Childhood Education would say something like, "I'm so glad to hear that you're developing this program at Teachers College in the Department of Special Education because of your Early Childhood background." On the other hand, Special Educators would make a similar comment slanted in the other direction implying that my students would now be prepared to use Special Educational strategies in Early Childhood settings.

In visiting and affiliating with specialized Early Childhood programs, when questions of educational programming arose concerning an individual child or a particular group of children, I frequently found myself making recommendations based on seemingly opposed theoretical educational approaches, to directors and teachers in different settings and many times in the same setting at different times.

In addition, I often heard students in my classes proposing either one or another theoretical or practical approach as the solution to all the problems

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of educational programming for young children. Specific programs and theoretical approaches are often presented in such positive ways that they sound as if they have the answers to the many perplexing problems that still face us. The more charismatic the presentation, the more easily the student succumbs to the appeal of using one approach to the exclusion of others.

Hearing established professionals promoting either an Early Childhood or a Special Education approach and hearing students express strong preferences for one school of thought at a relatively early stage in their professional career led me to an over-riding goal for my own courses on the education of young handicapped children. This goal for prospective Early Childhood/ Special Educators is: To establish and maintain an attitude which commits them to continually evaluate all the options open to them in providing an educational environment for young children and their families, so that the total experience achieves the appropriate balance for each child's developmental and special needs. Both approaches recognize the need for individualized programming. But what seem to be the opposing points on the educational balance scale which do not necessarily require an either-or decision? What is the so-called Early Childhood approach that is often presented as if it is exclusive of the strategies which are used in Special Education? Generally speaking, Early Childhood Educators are characterized as attempting to gear a program to fit developmental characteristics and needs as they have been documented by developmental psychologists. Traditionally, therefore, phrases that are often used in conjunction with these programs are: "exploring and experimenting with materials, language, social interactions, etc.;" "self-initiated or spontaneous activities;" "independence in decision making;" "discovery learning;" "acknowledgement and respect for expression of feelings;"

"intrinsically motivating experiences and learning for learning's sake;" "a child's play is his work;" "educating the whole child." These programs are often described as being child-oriented where the curriculum is expected to unfold as the sensitive teacher responds to the children's naturally evolving expressions of interest and concern.

When Special Educators hear these characterizations they often feel that they are unrealistic for Special Educational Programs. They feel that there would be utter chaos and that many of the children's negative types of behaviors would be perpetuated if these ideas were implemented.

Therefore Special Educators offer the following alternatives which tend to characterize their approach: "a transdisciplinary approach to diagnosis and programming;" "examination of the child's entering behaviors;" "analyzing educational tasks;" "stating long-range goals and specifying short-term instructional objectives;" "sequencing learning tasks;" "quantitatively measuring changes in behavior;" "modifying behaviors and behavioral modification" (the last two terms not being necessarily synonymous); "extrinsic motivation and reinforcement;" "structuring the environment."

Early Childhood Educators, especially those with a strongly humanistic approach, have been heard to respond to the foregoing Special Education characterizations in the following ways: "It's such a mechanistic approach to human beings;" "how do you foster independent functioning which is every educator's long range goal?" "some of the tasks are not developmentally oriented;" "it's too skill oriented;" "the child's functioning is being too fragmented."

To the proponents of both seemingly diverse approaches and their criticisms of each other, the answer is "You're right, and you're right,"

if either is applied exclusively. John McV. Hunt has proposed that the crucial task of any educator is to provide the right match to the child's developing needs and skills. In order for this to occur Early Childhood-Special Educators must discard previous prejudices and biases and attempt to synthesize and apply both approaches in an appropriately balanced way.

Let me cite some examples of imbalanced approaches I have seen.

A Special Educator, recently, was observing an Early Childhood program for children with special needs. The teacher and the children, at the moment, were playing an adapted version of bowling with miniature pins and balls. In the process of playing the game, there was general enjoyment and appreciation expressed over the efforts of the children and the successes of some to knock down a number of the pins. In addition, the teacher asked the children to tell her how many pins had been knocked down. Sometimes an interesting one-to-one counting session ensued. The Special Educator in the observation room questioned the effectiveness of incorporating a number concept and counting lesson in the context of this game. "Isn't the approach typical of the one that is used by a lot of middle-class mothers with their children?" she asked. "Wouldn't it be more effective to sit down at the table with appropriate mathematics materials and teach the child using a systematic programmed sequential presentation?" The "special" program she was observing at the moment, looked like any other preschool program to her. She felt that a structured pedagogic approach should have been used with this group of developmentally delayed four year old children. Although she was told that a structured learning approach is incorporated in the program at appropriate times of the day, she still saw no value in incorporating the learning or reinforcing of certain mathematics concepts during a play experience. In addition, she ignored

the fact that the children were also practicing perceptual-motor control activities, receptive-expressive language, learning to take turns, and apparently deriving pleasure from the total experience.

The following two anecdotes, related to behavioral modification techniques, should remind us to introspect about the methods we use or think we are using in our programs. A language delayed child was taken out of his classroom just before lunchtime so that he would be in a hungry state for his language therapy sessions which used food as a primary reinforcer in a behavioral modification approach. This procedure, used with young children, is, of course, extremely controversial. Whenever the child approximated or attempted to approximate the sound that was being elicited by the therapist, she immediately hugged the child in her lap and gave him a bit of food. The child soon demonstrated that he was educable. Even though he couldn't or wouldn't say the sound, he jumped into the therapist's lap, hugged her, and looked toward the food.

In another setting which served young multi-handicapped children, the director and her teachers condemned the use of behavioral modification tactics with all human beings and especially with unsuspecting, relatively powerless children. However, the director approved of one of her teacher's plans for the adults in the room to consistently ignore the grunts of one of the children and to respond immediately to an effort to articulate a meaningful sound: an obvious example of behavioral modification.

Several years ago, a teacher stated that she had set up her program in a way which would foster the children's exploration of their educational environment and provide immediate feedback about their ability to deal with various aspects of it. The group of children were composed of behaviorally disordered

children with other compounding variables such as organic involvement and family disruption. A typical occurrence was a child overturning a bowl of pancake batter which had been left precariously on a top shelf unmonitored. Although this type of situation was not the intent of the teacher, it occurred frequently due to her "laissez-faire" attitude. Other accidents and incidents bordering on child neglect had also been observed under the guise of satisfying the child's need to explore. But these children were not being provided with the needed security of rational limits established by trusted adults who could protect them from their own impulsive, sometimes,dangerous behaviors and who could also serve as models for the development of inner controls.

On several occasions the children in this program were observed engaging in self-stimulating, perseverative, and bizarre behaviors. One of these children attempted to leap at a visitor as he customarily does to his teachers during class sessions. The observer prevented the child from completing the leap. He held the child's hands, moved down to his eye level, told the child his own name and said, "Hello." After about five minutes of interaction during which time the child was continually being redirected into safer and more civilized behavior, the teacher was surprised by the fact that the child, for the first time, tried to say, "Hello" to a stranger. This stranger had expressed a sincere interest in knowing the child while not permitting self- or other destructive behavior.

In another special setting that provides a one-to-one intensive instructional play experience with very young behaviorally disturbed children, I observed the teacher elicit some appropriate behaviors from a child using well-designed materials, selected beforehand to match the needs of the child.

But as I continued to observe the session, I noticed with dismay that the child barely finished the activity when it was hurriedly terminated and replaced immediately with another well task-analyzed activity. The teacher, in this particular setting, I am sure, accumulated well-written reports about the child's emerging abilities in the areas of perceptual-motor functioning, sensory awareness, cognition, etc. However, she did not attend to the child's needs as closely as she had analyzed her materials. The total neglect of the child's social-emotional needs and emerging concept of himself as a human being who is appreciated for his ability to concentrate, finish a task, and to achieve small and large successes was blatantly obvious. The teacher demonstrated her ability to implement certain Special Education strategies but in the process had not integrated humanistic objectives in her interaction with the child.

At another time, a colleague and I observed a child who was being screened for admittance into a special program. This young child played with a variety of materials while his tense-looking mother sat looking on. Every once in a while, the child looked briefly at his mother as he played. He tended to look more frequently at his mother as he began to roll and throw a small ball rather forcefully at different targets around the room. It appeared to us that this kind of behavior was ordinarily not encouraged by the mother. As the child continued this activity, he preceded each of his actions with a similar statement. Referring to the ball, he would say, "He gonna hit the wall; he gonna hit the chair, etc." We immediately noted the inappropriateness of the use of the personal pronoun "he" for "it" and moreover, we wondered if the misuse of the pronoun was intentional. Perhaps he was personifying the wooden ball and extending himself into its actions thereby getting some satisfaction from these "acting-out" behaviors of the ball, for which he could not be blamed.

We felt fairly self-satisfied with our acute observations and interpretations until we found out about the child's Jamaican background and linguistic style of using the pronoun "he" for "it". This particular anecdote is an object lesson to teachers and psychologists who do not balance their interpretations of children's behaviors based on classroom activities with complementary information about the child and his background from other sources.

An Early Childhood Educator, recently discussed a child with his language therapist. The teacher was in awe of the therapist's successful strategies because she, herself, had observed the child apply his learned lessons of language concepts to the materials and activities in the room. The teacher wondered what else she could provide for this child in her classroom, since the therapist was doing so well with him already in her one-to-one sessions with him. Even though the teacher ordinarily defended a child's right to a group educational program, in this situation, she needed to be reminded by the therapist about the balance the child needed in his life and how the classroom situation provided a natural social context for extending and reinforcing what he was learning in his therapeutic lessons.

A sufficient number of programs and research studies have accumulated to demonstrate that children learn in a variety of ways. The findings of studies, however, are not yet refined enough to justify the predominant application of one approach to the exclusion of another. For this reason the content of my courses purposely includes presentations and discussions of seemingly conflicting ideas and approaches. In introductory lectures, it is stated strongly that the course will not provide absolute answers to any questions which students may have, because presently there are no absolute answers. Research has not been systematic or intensive enough to provide

educators with absolute preventive or antidote prescriptions to prevalent educational problems. Until there is a concentrated, cooperative effort to this end, teachers are the most important researchers in the field, if they approach their tasks in a systematic hypothesis-testing way.

One of the roles I have assumed in class discussions is that of devil's advocate. If a student comes to seminar with a strongly negative description of an educational strategy that has been observed in a student-teaching practicum experience, the student is first asked to present a mini-case study and to answer relevant questions before a critical analysis is made of the strategy. Although a logical rationale can usually be found for the strategy being analyzed, the discussion is opened up for other possible educational procedures which might also serve the child and the educational program in an effective way. The goal is to make the students aware that there is no one way to approach educational problems. This sometimes produces discomfort.

Certain students enter the program with the misconceived notion that the Special Education approach is one which will be able to prescribe educational programs in a highly specific, appropriate way. They feel that all one needs is a detailed cross-disciplinary description of the child and his problems and, voilà, a step-by-step remediation can be applied to move the child to more appropriate functioning, at least that's how some of their Special Education text books sounded to them.

At the other extreme are students who are willing to take some child development and education courses because they want to work with small children and have demonstrated love and patience with handicapped children. Although these attitudes are an asset, these students need to learn rather quickly that they need to be counterbalanced by some other attitudes and technical skills which include objective observations, operational reports

of children's behaviors and introspective evaluations of teaching procedures related to these observations.

Students are also reminded of the fact that neatly presented curriculum guides and sequences of tasks are usually not backed up with validation or reliability studies for specific target populations or generalized to other populations. Even though almost every packaged curriculum guide states that it is to be used only as a guide, it still tends to be used verbatim by many. I try to make students feel as uncomfortable as possible doing this before they leave my courses.

Other options available to educators have not been mentioned, such as standardized testing and systematized observation techniques; mainstreamed and non-mainstreamed programs, center-based and home-based programs, a particular educational model and another contrasting one, professional and paraprofessional programmers. As professionals who are educating Early Childhood-Special Educators, we have a responsibility to accustom teachers to draw on and evaluate the effectiveness of all possible techniques and philosophies. Teachers need to be encouraged to apply these procedures with a disciplined approach but always with flexibility as to the child and his situation in bringing balance to his daily life.